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RURAL HOUSING

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Rural housing is here taken to mean the housing of that portion of the community which gets the larger part of its living directly from the cultivation of the land, viz., the farmers; together with a few others, like the country minister, the store-keeper, the cobbler, the blacksmith, who may be farmers in a small way and whose manner of life in any case is substantially the same as that of the farmers among whom they live. The subject is restricted in its application to the older settled parts of the country. No attempt is made to deal with conditions as they exist in some sections which have lagged behind the general social development of the time, nor in those which are still in the pioneer stage or which at best are but a short remove from pioneer days.

Rural housing as a whole exhibits the same differences, the same degrees of excellence as does the housing of the towns. There are numbers of farms where the dwellings are well built and provided with modern systems of heating and lighting and with every convenience for the economical despatch of the work of the household, where the barns and outhouses are well kept and clean, and where the sanitation is all that can be desired. At the other end of the scale there are to be found here and there in the country single houses or small groups of houses which exhibit many of the characteristic marks of the slum. Not all, for in the open country at the worst, there is plenty of fresh air and sunlight and space; but there are dirt and filth indescribable, the most primitive sanitation, serious overcrowding and indecent promiscuity. These slum spots exist not only in remote districts far from the railroads in the backlash of civilization, but close search will find them in many communities where they would not be expected and where their presence is known to but few, on narrow country by-ways and lanes, in wild places in the vicinity of the railways, in neglected woodlands; indeed, there is scarcely a hamlet or town within whose limits these disreputable shacks may not be discovered.

Two or three cases may be instanced by way of illustration. The family of a small farmer on the outskirts of a country village was found living in a one-roomed log cabin in utter disregard of the ordinary laws of health and decency. As a consequence, two of the children had been attacked by tuberculosis, and unless immediate action were taken there was every reason to believe that all would become affected. Another such family lived in a dilapidated combination of dwelling and barn, not fit to be the habitation of either cattle or human beings, where the overcrowding was equal to that in the most congested districts of the cities and all sanitary conveniences were conspicuous by their absence. As an example of a still lower type there may be instanced a degenerate group of four men, two women and three children who occupied a shack in a clearing of the woods in the neighborhood of a New England town until they were finally dispersed by the authorities.

Such cases can be duplicated almost anywhere. In all of them, with scarcely an exception, the housing conditions are vile, the equal of anything in the slums of the towns, and yet in the opinion of the writer the problem which they present is not essentially one of housing reform. In this respect the particularly bad housing of the rural districts is quite different from that of the towns. City slums are due in large measure to land and building speculation, the utilization of land for dwelling house sites which is too valuable for this purpose, an inequitable system of taxation, the lack of any housing law worth the name, inadequate supervision, and a disposition on the part of some landlords to exploit their tenants. These are causes which are in no way connected with the character of the families living in the slums, and their operation can be checked by right legislation honestly enforced. Germany is an example to the world of what can be done in this way. One of the most remarkable features about many of the German cities is the complete elimination of the slum. It does not and can not exist in the face of the effective legislation against it, and by the same kind of legislation it can be driven out of American cities whenever the people so desire.

The slum spot in the open country, however, is not so much due to social or economic causes beyond the control of the occupant as it is to his own mental and moral deficiencies. Land speculation, speculative building, methods of taxation, the greed of landlords, none of these in most cases, has anything to do with it.

Such dwellings are the natural expression of the lives of the shiftless, feeble minded, immoral, drunken or criminal people who inhabit them. It is not a better housing law which is required here so much as it is the labor colony, the penitentiary, the almshouse and the home for moral imbeciles. These social plague spots are the cause of enormous public expense and are a steadily increasing burden upon the industry and thrift of the community. They should be accurately registered, carefully studied, and each one should be disposed of upon its own merits. All this will cost much effort and money but not a tithe of what it will cost twenty, thirty, of fifty years hence, and incidentally it will wipe out the country slum.

Thus neither the best nor the worst housing in the rural districts is in need, as such, of special attention. But between the best and the worst there is a great deal of existing housing which is susceptible of improvement, the like of which should not be permitted in the future. In a great many farm houses the occupants are not safe from fire and in many more the sanitary arrangements are extremely defective. Every year lives are lost in the destruction of farm houses by fire, which would not happen if the proper safeguards were provided. After a few experiences of this kind we might suppose that something would be done to prevent such accidents in the future, but when the holocausts of the cities have no effect upon the public conscience it is, of course, too much to expect that the loss of a single life here and there will attract any notice.

But the case is different with defective rural sanitation. The disposal of the waste products of the body and the household is a much more serious matter, and mistakes are dangerous to a very much larger number of people. Dr. W. C. Stiles, of the U.S. Marine Hospital Service, states that of 3369 farmhouses in six different states 57 per cent have no privies of any kind. The better grade of farmhouse is always provided with some sort of sanitary convenience, but the number where it is anything more than the ordinary outdoor privy is comparatively small. The neglected privy is the greatest danger to the health of the farming community, and a menace to the population of the towns through the part which it may play in the contamination of the milk, vegetables, and fruits sent to city markets. It defiles the soil around it, and unless carefully located may pollute the family water supply. The fact is so generally known that it is not necessary to give statistics showing

that serious epidemics have been started by the use of water from country wells polluted by the disease-infected privy. It is the breeding place of countless generations of flies, and when used by persons suffering from any kind of infectious disease, as fevers, dysentery, diarrhea, and the like, the contagion may be spread far and wide by their agency.

The family cesspool is but one degree less dangerous than the outdoor privy, and together they have undoubtedly been responsible for a vast amount of sickness and death. Accurate statistics on this point are not available, and perhaps never can be, but the records of outbreaks of infectious diseases and the studies of the transmission of contagion by flies and insects have established the fact beyond dispute, that carelessness in the disposal of human and household waste has resulted in the destruction of thousands upon thousands of valuable lives; and still this appalling and preventable slaughter goes on.

Besides these glaring defects in country housing, danger from fire due to unsafe construction and the serious menace from bad sanitation due to carelessness and ignorance, there are other objectionable features, of secondary importance, it is true, but which nevertheless have a marked effect upon the health and happiness of the people. Great numbers of farm houses have few of the conveniences which have become necessities in these modern days, no plumbing, no bathroom, no water in the house, no central heating apparatus, no lighting except the lamp or candle, and little or none of the machinery in the kitchen, the laundry and the dairy which lighten so much the work of the housewife. The lack of these comforts and conveniences entails hard and unrelenting labor upon the women of countless households, often seriously affecting health and breaking them down before their time. It is needless to say that there can be a perfectly wholesome family life without electric light and a furnace, but rural housing will not be what it ought to be until all country dwellings have at least the minimum essentials for the saving of time and strength in the performance of the daily work of the household, as they are now provided in the best type of houses on prosperous farms.

Of course these are matters which at present are beyond the reach of the law. No housing code can prescribe that every house shall be provided with stationary washtubs and a gasoline engine for

pumping water, but all who are interested in the improvement of country living conditions should look forward to the time when at least the necessities for comfortable living will be included as a matter of course in the equipment of the country dwelling. It cannot be done today, nor will it be possible until the economic condition of the farmer is much better than it is at present. This last is the fundamental prerequisite for securing these features of the best country housing. The state can demand that from the viewpoint of fire risk dwellings shall be made safe for their inmates, and it can insist that rural conditions shall not endanger the health of the community; but anything more than this, such as the installation of bathrooms and washing machines and power churns, and the like, must be conditioned upon the ability of the farmer or country householder to pay for them; hence the improvement of rural housing is bound up with the whole country life problem; solve this and you secure the other.

It is sometimes charged, with a show of reason, that social reformers are strangely blind to the causes which produce the evils they are fighting, and so do not apply their efforts where they will do the most good. For those who are working for better country housing to lay themselves open to such criticism would be fatuous in the extreme. On the contrary, they should be close students of the needs of country life and deeply interested in all that makes for rural progress; otherwise they are no better than a medical specialist who gives his treatment without reference to the general health of his patient.

Ex-President Roosevelt diagnosed the needs of rural life as "better farming, better business, better living." The farmers as a class have not kept up with the times. Great advance has been made in the application of science to the processes of agriculture, but the average farmer is very slow to adopt new methods. He is apt to think that what was good enough for his father is good enough for him and continues in the old ways. Furthermore, in almost every line of business except farming, there has been a large reduction in overhead expenses through combination. The farmers of Denmark and Holland have developed coöperation in the marketing of their products must successfully, to the mutual profit of both themselves and the consumer, but not yet has this been done to any such extent in the United States. Apples, for instance, have been selling in

city markets for a dollar a bushel while fifteen or twenty miles away great quantities have been rotting on the ground, to the mutual loss of both the farmer and the consumer. Better business management would find a remedy for such a condition. Better living means less isolation and a better social life, better amusements, better education, a wider outlook, a larger influence in affairs. Not until there has been improvement in country life in these directions can rural housing become what it ought to be; consequently every one who hopes some time to see the country dwelling made comfortable, convenient and safe in all points, should apply himself to the fundamental, underlying problem of making the farmer economically able to satisfy these conditions.

Certain requirements, however, for safety and health should not wait upon this somewhat distant consummation. The country householder, landlord or owner, should be compelled by law to provide the minimum essentials of decent and healthful living: well lighted rooms of reasonable size, privacy, freedom from overcrowding, protection against fire, and proper sanitary conveniences inside the house wherever possible, or if they must be out-of-doors then so constructed as to safeguard the health of the community. It should not be difficult to secure this measure of rural housing regulation, for the interests which oppose similiar regulation for city and town have little influence in the more sparsely settled districts of the country.

The construction and maintenance of cesspools and out-door privies should be according to law. Stiles remarks that "a compulsory sanitary privy law or ordinance should exist and be strictly enforced in all localities in which connection with a sewer system is not enforced. Since from a sanitary point of view, the privy is a public structure in that it influences public health, it seems wisest to have city and town ordinances which provide for a licensing of all privies, the license being fixed at a sum which will enable the town or city to provide the receptacles (tub, pail, etc.), the disinfectant, and the service for cleaning. The expense involved will vary according to local conditions and density of population. The importance of taking the responsibility of the care of the privy out of the hands of the family is evident when one considers that one careless family in a hundred might be a menace to all.

"It is probably the exception that an economical public privy cleaning service can be carried out in the open country, on account

of the distances between the houses. To meet the difficulties involved several suggestions may be considered, according to conditions. A county privy tax can be levied, the county can furnish the pail and the disinfectant, and one member of each family or of several neighboring families hired to clean the privy regularly; a landlord can be held responsible for the cleaning of all privies of his tenants, receiving from the county a certain sum for the service; a portion of the county privy tax might perhaps be apportioned by school districts and distributed as prizes among the school boys who keep their family privies in best condition; each head of a family might be held responsible for any soil pollution that may occur on his premises and be fined therefor."

Both the construction and care of cesspools and privies should be under strict supervision, preferably of the state boards of health. As a rule country local boards cannot be depended upon for this service. They have neither the knowledge nor the training which would make them useful inspectors. Furthermore, the enforcement of sanitary laws upon one's friends and neighbors is a thankless and unpopular duty and it cannot be expected that it will be done efficiently. The public welfare demands that it be put into the hands of the state boards of health, whose agents can do their work without fear or favor.

These two measures, securing the essentials of healthful dwelling house construction and sanitation, represent the maximum improvement in rural housing that now seems possible. A further advance in the direction of comfort and convenience, including the installation of labor saving devices, will follow a rise in the general economic ability of country life.